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ABSTRACT

In an effort to reduce student writing apprehension, an informal, in-class study was conducted in a lower-level college writing course at an Alabama university. The 16 students in this course took a Writing Apprehension Test (WAT--pretest) on the first day of class. Throughout the course, all writing was based on student experiences and came from student journals, all assignments were completed in class and reviewed in small groups discussions, and specific criteria from the rating scale used to evaluate student essays were discussed. Late in the course, students exchanged two essays with a partner--one written early in the course and one written late--and evaluated them as peer critics. Students then evaluated their own essays. Findings from these observations and WAT posttest scores indicated that 13 students were less apprehensive about their writing after the course than before it. In addition, results showed that students wrote more in their later essays, suggesting a greater willingness to commit themselves on paper. Sentence combining exercises from workbooks did not seem to improve writing skills. Finally, analysis revealed that students' later essays were superior to their earlier ones, suggesting that students' overall writing skills had improved. (The WAT, various instructional and evaluation data, and sample essays are appended.) (JD)

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Reducing Writing Apprehension in English Classes

Mary Ann Tighe

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Reducing Writing Apprehension in English Classes

Mary Ann Tighe

Writing apprehension means fear or anxiety about writing. Research in this area offers three findings which are important to classroom teachers. First, students who are highly apprehensive about writing do write less skillfully than their more confident peers. Second, this apprehension interferes with the development of their writing skills. And third, these students avoid writing situations, thereby avoiding the very classes which might help them. It is not clear whether high apprehension causes poor writing skills or lack of writing skills causes apprehension, but there is probably an interaction. What then does cause writing apprehension? Adverse critical comments seem to be the main source of writing apprehension; therefore, evaluation procedures play a critical role in both creating and reducing apprehension. What are the treatments? First, it is important for students to understand the evaluation policy, to examine sample writings and to discuss and to determine appropriate criteria. Another approach to treating writing apprehension is a task analysis, to break down the writing task into clear, specific steps and devise activities for each level so that writers master each step before moving on to the next. If they feel prepared to write, they are less apprehensive. And finally, the use of peer groups for response during the revising stage is also helpful. This overview of the research is explained more fully in Michael Smith's Reducing Writing Apprehension (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1984).

With this background in mind, I would like to look at a course in developmental English which I taught last year. At Troy State University all entering freshmen take a placement exam. It consists of an objective test on grammar and usage and an essay, one paragraph in length, with a choice of three assigned topics. The English faculty then determines placement in English 090, where the emphasis is on grammar and usage; English 091, which focuses on the paragraph; or English 101, where students begin writing essays. Last winter I taught a section of English 091,

where the focus is on the development of nine paragraphs in six specific modes. Students are required to write the paragraphs and complete individualized assignments in a self-help type workbook. I had to work within the confines of the syllabus, but I was free to determine how I wanted to develop their writing skills within these specific requirements. The students who were assigned to English 091 had varying attitudes. Some were angry that they had been placed there, others were embarrassed, and many were anxious and apprehensive. They looked at English 091 as one more hurdle to be overcome before they could fulfill their English requirement and move on to the courses they really wanted to take. I had two goals. One was to improve their writing ability. The other was to change their attitude so they would see writing, not just as a set of exercises where they tried to guess what the teacher wanted, but as a valuable skill that would help them sort out their own ideas and experiences, a skill that would lead them to new understandings and knowledge, and a skill that they would be using no matter what their chosen profession.

On the first day of class students took the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test. You have a copy on page 1 of your handout. Take a moment to respond to the first two or three statements, and then we will look at the way the scale is interpreted. On page 2 you will find a guide which identifies each statement as positive or negative, with "positive" not meaning a good attitude but meaning a positive indication of high apprehension. Therefore, if students put a "1" for number 1, they strongly agree with the statement, "I avoid writing," and they would receive only +1 points. But if they strongly disagree, they receive +5 points. The higher the total score, the more confident the writer, the lower the total score, the more apprehensive. Number 2 is a negative statement; it shows confidence, not apprehension. If students strongly disagree with the statement, "I have no fear of my writing's being evaluated, they receive -5 points, while students who agree receive -1. Complete directions are included on page 2 under "Grading the Test." Students completed this survey again at the end of the quarter, and we will be

looking at the results of these pre- and post-tests in a few minutes.

Students also wrote pre- and post-essays. The assignment is printed on page 2. For the pre-writing, one half the class received the topic, "Tell about a time when you were happy." The other half was assigned the same topic with the substitution of "sad" for happy. The assignments were reversed at the end of the quarter, and the papers were evaluated holistically.

Throughout the course I used three strategies to reduce writing apprehension and improve writing skills. First, all writing came from student journals and was based on student experiences. Students made daily in-class journal entries and were encouraged to continue writing outside the classroom. For journal topics I used the suggestions in a book by Stephen Judy and Susan Judy, The Teaching of Writing (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981). The authors suggest a sequence of writing assignments that move from "Opening Up" and "Exploring the Self" to writing about "Oneself and Others" and finally "Exploring Issues, Problems, and Values" in writing. On page 3 you will find examples from each of these categories. The first category, "Opening Up," provided content for their first three paragraphs. They had no required modes at this point, but most of them tended toward narrative or description. Journal entries from "Exploring the Self" were used for example and definition paragraphs, "Oneself and Others" served as a basis for comparison/contrast and classification/division, and "Exploring Issues, Problems, and Values" was a source for cause/effect and process analysis. Although teaching and requiring students to write in specific modes can be a very limited writing experience, the use of these journal topics provided students with a much richer source of ideas upon which to draw. And I believe that writing about their own experiences gave them a sense of confidence, while the sequence of the topics moved them gradually to a more public kind of writing.

The second strategy I used throughout the quarter was to complete all assignments with the class. Although the course outline was product-oriented, I tried

to develop the concept of writing as a process, sharing my own prewritings, drafts, and revisions with the class. In turn, I asked them to share their writings and ideas with partners, small groups, and eventually the entire class. I have included on pages 4 and 5 some of the activities we used to encourage talking and thinking about writing as a process and also the strategies we used to develop a concept of audience and purpose.

On page 4 are the guides for small discussion groups. At this point students are moving from journal notes to selecting topics and then to writing a draft. They do this by first talking about tentative topics and noting audience response and questions. In the second activity students are asked to make a judgment and rate two paragraphs by looking for specific details which illustrate abstract or general ideas. They note that number 2 has significant information, it tells the reader something they do not already know, it has sensory details, and it focuses on one predominant image.

On page 5 there is a guide for partners to use when responding to a rough draft. The questions are specific; they focus on the criteria which will be used to evaluate the final paper. Also on page 5 is a guide for a writer's workshop. This is another revision approach that may be used with the entire class or in smaller groups.

For each of these activities students were working with my papers, too, and I really did sense a change in class attitude. They became more positive, more open, more willing to share their writing as I discussed my own. As they had opportunities to talk about my writing, they became more receptive to my comments about theirs. At the same time they were developing skill in responding to each others' writing.

The third strategy I used was to discuss evaluation procedures about midway through the writing process, usually after the first draft was completed. On page 6 you see two paragraphs which we discuss using the specific criteria identified in the rating scale below. We discuss this scale, noting the emphasis on development.

They note that paragraph number 1 remains general. They underline sentences where the author needs to downshift, to move on to specific details or examples. They recognize that number 2 is better because the author does move from abstract statements about an "eric feeling" to concrete and specific details. The three main headings in the scale remain unchanged for the nine assignments, but the subpoints vary with each composition. Students have input as to what criteria should be included for each assignment.

Finally, after students have written pre- and post-essays on the sad/happy topic, a class member reads and evaluates both essays to determine which is better. The evaluation form is on page 7. After authors receive this critique, they do a self-evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses. At the bottom of page 7 are the pre- and post-essays that Mark wrote. The "sad" essay is the post-essay. Both a student evaluator and I agreed that it was the better essay. His peer critic commented, while discussing organization and development, that in the "sad" essay "he went in time order," but in the happy one "there is no definite order." In regard to development the critic explained "He did good about going general to specific. First he talked about his calf, then the things that led up and his being sold." Mark, the author, identified his own greatest strength as his imagination and his weakness as his vocabulary. I think both students made some accurate and perceptive comments about the writing. This is an important step for students who, at the beginning of the course, had little confidence in themselves and were waiting for me to tell them what was right or wrong with their writing.

On page 8 you see a summary of some of the findings and results of this quarter's work. Under the heading Writing Apprehension are listed the plus and minus scores for 16 students; thirteen were less apprehensive, three were more so. The increase in points varies widely, ranging from +1 to +32. I did not do an analysis to discover how much of this increase was statistically significant and how much was due to chance. I simply looked for trends. Students in four other

sections of English 091 also completed the pre- and post-surveys. At the end of the quarter, in Class A the scores were +5 and -9; in Class B, +6 and -5; in Class C, +7 and -10; and in Class D, +12 and -1. In only one of these four sections did writing apprehension appear to decrease. In the others it increased or remained basically steady. I do not believe that the strategies I used are the only way to reduce writing apprehension, but, looking at these scores, I believe that writing apprehension will not necessarily be reduced simply by the act of taking English 091.

The second group of figures reflects the total number of words written. Although more words does not necessarily mean a better paper, when students are less apprehensive, they do seem more willing to commit themselves on paper, to take a chance by saying more. All students wrote more words in their post-essays while for some the number more than doubled.

The average length of T-units is recorded next. Students worked on sentence combining exercises in their workbooks, and they also worked together on exercises taken from their own papers. However, the time spent on sentence combining was minimal. Although for most students the average length of T-units increased, for a few it decreased in the post-essay, and even the increases are not particularly high. Once again I sensed a problem, the frustration in transferring workbook exercises to a student's own writing process. However, I believe that if we had spent more time working with sentences from their own papers, we would have made more progress.

Our two coordinators of freshmen composition read the pre- and post-essays and evaluated them holistically, simply indicating the better essay. They agreed on 13 of the 16 essays. Two graduate students served as third readers on the three remaining essays. As a result only one pre-essay was indicated as better, while 15 post-essays were judged as being better writing samples.

Actually, I felt their writing skills improved even more than is indicated in this analysis. The pre- and post-writing situations were restricted as to topic and time, being written on an assigned topic in a fifty minute class period. Throughout the quarter they had been spending four or five days generating ideas,

writing, discussing, and revising. As a result I saw a more dramatic improvement between their early papers and the ones they were writing at the end of the quarter than I did between pre- and post-essays.

Students with high writing apprehension tend to avoid both writing courses and careers which involve writing. Limited research in this area suggests that specific intervention strategies do reduce writing apprehension and improve writing skills. This was not a structured research project with experimental and control groups. But this is what I did in my class, and I was happy with the results. I want to continue revising these procedures in my own freshmen English classes, and, equally important, I want to share these ideas with my students in English Education, those future English teachers who will soon be working with high school students, teaching them to write compositions. We need to continue exploring the issue to help students at all levels to overcome apprehension and to develop writing competencies so that they will not avoid writing situations.

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Measurement of Writing Apprehension
(The Daly-Miller Test)

Below is a series of statements about writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by circling the number that shows whether you strongly agree, agree, are uncertain, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement. While some of these statements may be repetitious, please respond to all of them; take your time and try to be as honest as possible. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter.

1 = strongly agree
2 = agree
3 = uncertain
4 = disagree
5 = strongly disagree

1 2 3 4 5	1. I avoid writing.
1 2 3 4 5	2. I have no fear of my writing's being evaluated.
1 2 3 4 5	3. I look forward to writing down my ideas.
1 2 3 4 5	4. I am afraid of writing essays when I know they will be evaluated.
1 2 3 4 5	5. Taking a composition course is a very frightening experience.
1 2 3 4 5	6. Handing in a composition makes me feel good.
1 2 3 4 5	7. My mind seems to go blank when I start to work on my composition.
1 2 3 4 5	8. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time.
1 2 3 4 5	9. I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication.
1 2 3 4 5	10. I like to write down my ideas.
1 2 3 4 5	11. I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas clearly in writing.
1 2 3 4 5	12. I like to have my friends read what I have written.
1 2 3 4 5	13. I'm nervous about writing.
1 2 3 4 5	14. People seem to enjoy what I write.
1 2 3 4 5	15. I enjoy writing.
1 2 3 4 5	16. I never seem to be able to write down my ideas clearly.
1 2 3 4 5	17. Writing is a lot of fun.
1 2 3 4 5	18. I expect to do poorly in composition classes even before I enter them.
1 2 3 4 5	19. I like seeing my thoughts on paper.
1 2 3 4 5	20. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.
1 2 3 4 5	21. I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in a composition course.
1 2 3 4 5	22. When I hand in a composition, I know I'm going to do poorly.
1 2 3 4 5	23. It's easy for me to write good compositions.
1 2 3 4 5	24. I don't think I write as well as most other people.
1 2 3 4 5	25. I don't like my compositions to be evaluated.
1 2 3 4 5	26. I'm not good at writing.

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The Daly-Miller Test

Positive/Negative Statements

1. +	6. -	11. -	16. +	21. +
2. -	7. +	12. _	17. -	22. +
3. -	8. +	13. +	18. +	23. -
4. +	9. -	14. -	19. -	24. +
5. +	10. -	15. -	20. -	25. +
				26. +

Grading the Test

The response "strongly agree" has a value of one. If a student strongly agrees with statement 1, a positive statement, add one point to his or her score. The response "strongly disagree" has a value of five. If a student strongly disagrees with statement 2, a negative statement, subtract five points from his or her score. The other responses have the following values: agree, two; uncertain, three; disagree, four. If a student makes one of these responses, add or subtract the appropriate value. To determine whether to add or subtract, simply check the symbol opposite each of the numbers. Writing Apprehension = 78 + positive scores - negative statement scores. Scores may range from a low of 26 (an extremely apprehensive writer) to a high of 130 (a very confident writer).

Pre and Post Essay Writing Assignment

Topic: In one paragraph tell about a time (relate an incident) when you were happy/sad. Consider the following elements, but do not include them in your paper unless they are important to your narrative.

What events led up to this situation?
Were other people involved? Who? What roles did they play?
Where did this happen? When?
Did you learn anything from this incident?
How do you feel about it now?

Audience: Other students in class. Write something that you would be willing to share.

Purpose: To interest your audience. To tell them something significant that they do not already know. To help them "experience" what happened to you.

You may make notes or outline on this paper before beginning to write, but copy the final version on 8½ x 11 paper, writing in ink on every other line.

Note: One half the class wrote on the "happy" topic and one half on the "sad" topic for the pre essay writing. The assignment was reversed for the post essay writing.

The following journal topics are samples of those used for both in- and out-of-class assignments. They are taken from The Teaching of Writing (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981) by Stephen N. Judy and Susan J. Judy.

Opening Up

1. Early childhood. Things you did when you were younger and wiser (or not as wise as you thought). Memories of family. Things you did that scared the daylights out of grown-ups. Holidays. Disappointments. Being ill. Being happy.
2. People. Friends, enemies, rivals, unforgettable characters, relatives, people who frightened you, people who supported you.
3. Fond memories. Moments you'd like to relive.

Exploring the Self

1. An experience in your life when you were the center of attention--the star, the hero, a winner.
2. An incident in your life when you felt failure, disappointment, or embarrassment.
3. An event or experience in which you learned something important about yourself or other people.

Oneself and Others

1. Describe someone you dislike without directly telling the readers you dislike the person. Focus on physical descriptions or descriptions of actions to communicate your viewpoint.
2. Describe a person about whom you had a change of opinion--someone you first disliked and then grew to like or the other way around. Describe the behavior that led to the change.
3. Write about an argument that you had with a friend, taking the point of view of the adversary.

Exploring Issues, Problems, and Values

1. What are the important aspects of the subject you are analyzing? What are its outstanding traits or qualities? What are its positive qualities? Its negative ones?
2. What does it look like, sound like, feel like, or taste like? (Write down very specific observations so you can base your writing in concrete detail.)
3. What effect does your subject have on you? Does it please you? Stimulate you? Anger you? Irritate you? Frustrate you? Sadden you? Make you laugh or cry?

The following examples illustrate peer group activities during the prewriting, drafting, and revising stages.

Moving from journal notes to first draft

1. A. Author reads two tentative topics to the group.
   B. Group discusses: Which topic sounds like the most interesting basis for a narrative?
   C. Author selects tentative topic.
2. A. Author tells story orally:
      How does it begin?
      Who was involved?
      Where did it happen?
      How did it end?
      How did you feel throughout?
   B. Group interrupts at any time to ask clarifying questions.
   C. Author takes notes on questions that "audience" raises and uses these ideas for first draft.

Moving from general to specific

Read each paragraph and underline places where the author moves from general to specific comments. Which paragraph does a better job of developing an idea for the reader?

#1 Diane and I are perfect roommates for each other. We have similar personalities and interests, and we get along great. We went to the same high school our senior year, and that's where we got to know each other. Since we've been here this year we've become closer than ever in that we're more like sisters than best friends. We both have been there for each other all along to share the good times and the bad times together. We give each other help and advice whenever it's needed, or we just are there to talk to. This year has been a great and new experience for both of us, and it was good having someone to share it with. In times that we've been homesick or confused it's nice to know you have someone there so you don't have to face it alone. Needless to say, we enjoy each others company and therefore we spend alot of time together. Maybe that's what makes us perfect roommates.

#2 My dorm room is uncomfortable in many ways. The once white walls are now a dingy yellowish color. Sometimes they feel like they are closing in on me. The room is about 20 feet by 12 feet, but seems to get smaller the longer I stay in it. The beds are squeeky and very uncomfortable too. The springs are wore out, and I often wake up in the middle of the night with a backache. My overhead light isn't working right either, it keeps flickering on and off all the time. The light over my desk takes about a minute to warm up and come on. As uncomfortable as my room may seem, I must tolerate it, because it's home.

Working on revision with a partner

After reading the author's draft, answer the following questions.

1. In your own words what is the controlling idea? (Paraphrase the author's topic sentence,)

2. List the causes/effects which the author identifies.

3. Why do you think the author arranged the causes/effects in this order?

4. What transitional words or phrases does the author use? List them.

5. How could the author clarify the paper to make the controlling idea and support more clear for the reader? What could the author add? omit? revise?

6. After reading the paper, what did you learn that you did not know before? Be specific. If the information is general, say so.

7. What could the author add to make the paper more significant? more interesting? more informative?

Working on revision with a small group or the entire class

Guidelines for Writer's Workshop

1. Author reads paper
   Audience follows copy and makes notes

2. Audience responds
   A. What was handled well in the paper? (Discuss A thoroughly before proceeding to B.)
   B. How could the paper be improved?

   For both A and B be specific, indentifying the particular sentence, phrase, or word.

   Consider:
   Does the topic sentence have a controlling idea?
   Is the paragraph organized?
   Are there adequate transitions?
   Is the comparison parallel?
   Is there sufficient information?
   Is the information interesting?
   Does it come to a conclusion?

3. Author responds: How do you plan to revise the paper?

Determining criteria for evaluation

Both paragraphs describe a job. Read silently. Which is better? Why?

#1 I had been asked by a friend, if I would mind keeping their child for a summer job. I really needed the money so I agreed to babysit. The child was five years old and his name was Justin. The parents of the child did not believe in any type of discipline. Therefore the child would try to get away with everything. Everyday Justin and I would learn something new about each other. Towards the end of the summer I had tried to teach Justin that he must be nice. If he would be a good little boy then he would always be rewarded in some way. Justin's parents realized that they must love him but also teach discipline to him. Finally at the end of the summer Justin and I were best buddies. He had learned to be good and not to give babysitters such a hard time.

#2 The worst and most demeaning job I ever had was as a sewing machine operator in the textile mill in my hometown. I remember the erie feeling that came over me as I walked into the mill for the first time. All of the windows had been painted a dull green and all of the doors to the outside were closed once the workday began. There were times that I would notice different faces and I would almost sense their inner feelings, just by their expressions. There was a look of fatique as each morning they started the same monotonous job they had performed for so long. Many women had worked as long as thirty years at the same job. I can also recall the day that I consider a turning point in my life. As I walked into the ladies room this particular day, it was filled with cigarette smoke and was very dark since the window was painted. There was a lady talking about how much medication she was on for her nerves, something a lot of the women had a problem with. Another lady recalled losing a baby because of lifting heavy bundles of work. This was the day I knew I must make a better life for myself.

Evaluation Paragraph #1

Coherency (guides the reader) 1 2 3 4 (x2) ____
- Topic sentence with controlling idea
- Organization
- Use of transitions

Development (interests and informs the reader) 1 2 3 4 (x3) ____
- Sufficient information
- Focused information
- Moves from general to specific

Editorial skills (respects the reader) 1 2 3 4 (x1) ____

Evaluation Paragraph #7, Classification and Division

Coherency (guides the reader) 1 2 3 4 (x2) ____
- Topic sentence with controlling idea
- Organization
- Consideration of audience

Development (informs and interests the reader) 1 2 3 4 (x3) ____
- Parallel development of categories
- Support for controlling idea
- Specific details
- Significant information

Editorial skills (respects the reader) 1 2 3 4 (x1) ____

A=23-24, A- =22, B=19-21, B- =18, C=15-17, C- = 14, D=11-13, D- = 10

Moving from peer response to self evaluation

Author _____

Peer Critic _____

Read both paragraphs carefully; then answer the following questions.

1. Copy the topic sentence of each paragraph.

   Happy -

   Sad -

2. Which topic sentence is better? Why? (Consider focus and control)

3. Which paragraph has better organization? Why is it better? (Consider transitions and sequential order)

4. Which paragraph has better development? Why is it better? (Consider "general to specific" movement and significant information)

5. Which paragraph has fewer mechanical errors and more fluent sentence structure?

6. Overall, which paragraph is better? _____

- - - -

Figure 8.

Student Number	Writing Apprehension Pre	Post	+/-	Total No. of Words Pre	Post	+/-	Av Length of T-units Pre	Post	+/-	Holistic Evaluation Pre	Post
1	92	93	+1	85	165	+80	10.6	13.3	+2.7		X
2	61	65	+4	143	182	+39	12.5	11.4	-1.1		X
3	75	91	+16	189	250	+61	11.5	21	+9.5		X
4	51	56	+5	144	200	+56	10.5	16.4	+5.9		X
5	86	81	-5	72	141	+69	14.4	11.5	-2.9		X
6	66	77	+11	105	285	+180	11.6	21.2	+9.6		X
7	60	84	+24	101	135	+34	14.4	16.1	+1.7		X
8	59	91	+32	173	249	+76	13.3	15.7	+2.4		X
9	82	92	+10	127	182	+55	8.1	9.5	+1.4		X
10	80	75	-5	129	194	+65	9.1	13.2	+4.1		X
11	72	86	+14	113	189	+76	11.3	9.7	-1.6		X
12	105	100	-5	115	164	+49	16.4	11.8	-4.6		X
13	78	90	+12	74	252	+178	12.4	14.8	+2.5		X
14	59	84	+25	135	137	+2	10.2	8.5	-1.7		X
15	55	73	+18	95	195	+100	13.5	17	+3.5		X
16	78	93	+15	127	183	+56	8.3	9	+.7	X	

13 students were less apprehensive
3 students were more apprehensive

16 students wrote longer papers
0 students wrote shorter papers

11 students increased average T-unit length
5 students decreased average T-unit length

15 students wrote a better post essay
1 student wrote a better pre essay